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BOOKS

Libraries Have a Novel Idea

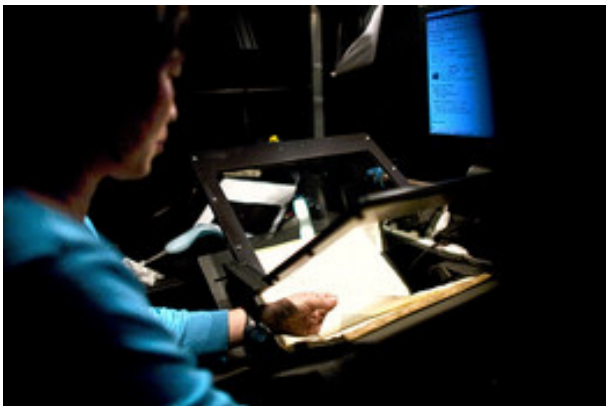
Lenders Join Forces to Let Patrons Check Out Digital Scans of Shelved Book Collections

By Geoffrey A. Fowler

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SAN FRANCISCO—Libraries are expanding e-book offerings with out-of-print editions, part of a broader effort to expand borrowing privileges in the Internet Age that could challenge traditional ideas about copyright.

Starting Tuesday, a group of libraries led by the Internet Archive, a nonprofit digital library, are joining forces to create a one-stop website for checking out e-books, including access to more than a million scanned public domain books and a catalog of thousands of contemporary e-book titles available at many public libraries.



Julia Fung scans in book pages one by one at the Internet Archive, a nonprofit digital library, in San Francisco on Monday BRIAN L. FRANK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

And in a first, participants including the Boston Public Library and the Marine Biological Laboratory will also contribute scans of a few hundred older books that are still in copyright, but no longer sold commercially. That part of the project could raise eyebrows, because copyright law is unclear in the digital books arena. Google Inc., which is working on its own book scanning efforts, has been mired in a legal brouhaha with authors and publishers over its digital books project.

To read the books, borrowers around the world can download and read them for free on computers or e-reading gadgets. Software renders the books inaccessible once the loan period ends. Two-thirds of American libraries offered e-book loans in 2009, according to a survey by the American Library Association. But those were mostly contemporary imprints from the last couple of years—say, the latest Stephen King novel.

The Internet Archive project, dubbed Openlibrary.org, goes a step further by opening up some access to the sorts of books that may have otherwise gathered dust on library shelves—mainly those published in the past 90 years, but of less popular interest.

Many libraries have built out their digital libraries by buying copies of new e-books from companies like Overdrive Inc. Openlibrary.org plans to catalog 70,000 of the books offered by Overdrive, and provide links to check them out from local libraries.

"We know that our users are starting their search for information online," said Thomas Blake, the digital projects manager at the Boston Public Library, which is contributing some in-copyright genealogical titles to the new effort. "Instead of sitting back and waiting for the people to come back into the library, we want to meet our users where they're living."

The Internet Archive's scanning effort hopes to extend digital libraries far beyond the sorts of contemporary e-books sold by Overdrive. The San Francisco-based library has been digitizing older books using 20 scanning centers around the world. Until now, those scans were mostly used to extend access to public domain works, or to give digital access to in-copyright books to the visually impaired.

"We're trying to build an integrated digital lending library of anything that is available anywhere, where you can go and find not just information about books, but also find the books themselves and borrow them," said Brewster Kahle, the founder and digital librarian of the Internet Archive.

With its latest project, the organization is making inroads into the idea of loaning in-copyright books to the masses. Only one person at a time will be allowed to check out a digital copy of an in-copyright book for two weeks. While on loan, the physical copy of the book won't be loaned, due to copyright restrictions.

The effort could face legal challenges from authors or publishers. Paul Aiken, the executive director of the Authors Guild—which challenged Google's scanning efforts—said "it is not clear what the legal basis of distributing these authors' work would be." He added: "I am not clear why it should be any different because a book is out of print. The authors' copyright doesn't diminish when a work is out of print."

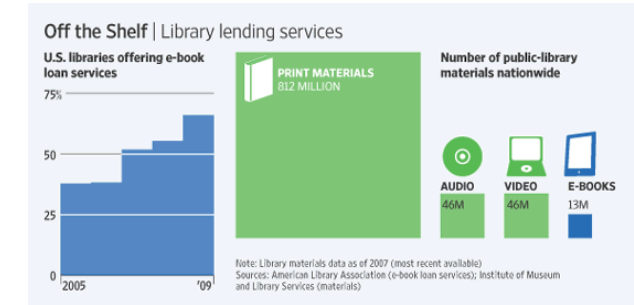
Mr. Kahle said, "We're just trying to do what libraries have always done."

Having to receive prior permission from a copyright owner in order to scan a book is onerous, said Mr. Blake, of the Boston Library. "If you own a physical copy of something, you should be able to loan it out. We don't think we're going to be disturbing the market value of these items."

Stewart Brand, author of the 1988 book "The Media Lab"—one of the scanned books that will now be available for loan—said he didn't mind seeing his title made available this way. Mr. Kahle at the Internet Archive asked his permission, he said, and he gave it because he thinks digitizing books has the potential to improve knowledge.

"I figure libraries are one of the major pillars of civilization, and in almost every case what librarians want is what they should get," Mr. Brand said.

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